

ALBANIA 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The government continued to address claims from religious groups for the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many of the property claims remained unresolved. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

U.S. embassy officials met regularly with government and religious leaders to discuss religious freedom issues raised by citizens, the media, and religious groups, including the importance of restoring religious property confiscated during the communist era. The embassy hosted events to promote religious freedom, such as iftars, religious freedom roundtables, and an interfaith dialogue.

Section I. Religious Demography

According to the 2011 census, the population is 2.8 million. It is difficult to assess the size of religious groups because nearly 20 percent of respondents declined to answer the optional census question about religious affiliation. Several religious leaders challenge the census results. According to the census, Sunni Muslims constitute nearly 57 percent of the population, Roman Catholics 10 percent, Orthodox Christians (the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania) nearly 7 percent, and Bektashi (a form of Shia Sufism) 2 percent. Other groups present include Bahais, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The State Committee on Cults reports more than 230 religious groups, organizations, foundations, and educational institutions operating in the country.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

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By law, the country is secular. According to the constitution, there is no official religion, and all religions are equal; however, the Sunni Muslim, Bektashi, Orthodox, and Catholic communities enjoy a greater degree of recognition and social status based on their historic presence in the country.

The Office of the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination receives and processes discrimination complaints, including those concerning religious practice. The State Committee on Cults, under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Tourism, Culture, Youth, and Sports, regulates relations between the government and religious groups, protects freedom of religion, and promotes interfaith cooperation and understanding. The committee maintains records and statistics on foreign religious groups that solicit its assistance. It also assists foreign employees of religious groups in obtaining residence permits.

The government does not require registration or licensing of religious groups. Any group may acquire official status by registering with the Tirana District Court as a nonprofit association, regardless of whether the group has a cultural, recreational, religious, or humanitarian character. Registration grants religious groups the right to hold bank accounts, to own property, and to receive some degree of tax-exempt status.

The constitution calls for separate bilateral agreements to regulate relations between the government and religious groups. The government has such agreements with the Roman Catholic Church (since 2002); with the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities (since 2008); and with the Evangelical Brotherhood of Albania, a Protestant umbrella organization (since 2010). Among other advantages, the agreements confer official recognition, prioritized property restitution, and tax exemptions.

According to the Ministry of Education, public schools are secular and the law prohibits ideological and religious indoctrination. Religion is not taught in public schools. According to official figures, religious groups, organizations, and foundations have 135 affiliated associations and foundations managing 102 educational institutions. By law, the Ministry of Education must license these schools and curricula must comply with national education standards. Catholic and Muslim groups operate numerous state-licensed schools. The Orthodox Church operates religious schools and a university.

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The government observes the following religious holidays as national holidays: Nevruz (celebrated by the Bektashi community), Easter (Catholic and Orthodox), Major Bajram (Eid al-Fitr), Minor Bajram (Eid al-Adha), and Christmas.

Government Practices

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom.

The government continued to address claims from religious groups regarding the return or restitution of property seized during the former communist era; however, many property claims remained unresolved. Following conclusion of the 2008 bilateral agreements between the government and the Muslim, Orthodox, and Bektashi communities, the government instructed the State Agency for the Restitution and Compensation of Property to give priority to properties owned by religious groups. However, administrative and legal challenges related to ownership claims in general made property restitution difficult for individuals and organizations, including religious groups, and progress was slow. For example, stalled administrative proceedings continued to keep the Bektashi community from reclaiming property in Ksamil that a court had returned to it in 2009.

Property ownership disputes and problems tracking or registering land ownership made it difficult for religious groups to acquire new land on which to build places of worship. Some groups rented existing buildings, but reported that difficulties acquiring land and constructing their own buildings impeded their ability to hold religious services.

The Albanian Islamic Community (AIC) continued to request building permits for a new mosque on land in Tirana that was being returned to the community through the complex post communist restitution process. The AIC continued to work with the government to complete the transfer of ownership.

Although there is no legal prohibition against wearing religious clothing or symbols, school principals had the right to set standards for “appropriate clothing,” which, at times, included restrictions on public displays of religious symbols.

Several religious leaders challenged the results of the 2011 census, alleging that census officials never visited a large number of their followers. Additionally, confusion regarding the consequences of ethnic and religious self-identification may have led many respondents not to identify their religious affiliation. For example, ethnic Greek minority groups encouraged their members to boycott the

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census, affecting measurements of the Greek ethnic minority and the Greek Orthodox Church.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were no reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

In response to the online release of the trailer of an anti-Muslim movie that sparked protests in several countries in September, Muslim leaders in Shkoder organized educational events and a blood drive in an effort to serve the community and educate the public about Islam. Several Muslim leaders made television appearances and public statements condemning violence and encouraging their members to respond peacefully to the offensive video.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy officials continued to urge the government to address religious property claims and return to religious groups the buildings, land, and other property confiscated during the communist era. The ambassador and other embassy officials frequently engaged religious leaders and community members in events such as iftars and roundtables that promoted religious tolerance. The embassy also organized numerous activities throughout the country to promote religious freedom and tolerance, including visits to madrassahs, public high schools, and other educational institutions. The embassy sponsored a program in which students at several religious educational institutions planned and carried out community projects, including some focused on encouraging tolerance. U.S. officials visited churches, mosques, and religious sites throughout the year to observe religious practices and celebrations.

In March the ambassador hosted an interfaith dialogue with the U.S. special envoy to monitor and combat anti-Semitism, the U.S. special representative to Muslim communities, and Muslim, Bektashi, Catholic, Orthodox, and evangelical Christian leaders. During the meeting, the religious leaders expressed support for each other and their communities and stated that historical factors led to long-standing interfaith harmony.